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<Letter to Editor> The Chimpanzees of Sierra Leone

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<LETTER TO EDITOR>**The Chimpanzees of
Sierra Leone**

Rosalind Hanson-Alp

We Need Your Help

Foundation Step By Step was set up to help support efforts to conserve chimpanzees in Sierra Leone where there are a significant number of orphaned chimpanzees in need of care and wild populations in need of protection. Our aim is to gain greater protection for wild chimpanzees, rehabilitation for orphaned chimpanzees, promote a broader public awareness of environmental issues and conduct ecological research to offer solutions for strengthening conservation policies in Sierra Leone.

Rehabilitating Orphaned Chimpanzees Back to the Wild

We have concentrated a great deal of our efforts on supporting the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, a facility on the outskirts of the capitol, Freetown, that offers a home and rehabilitation programme to chimpanzees kept illegally as pets. These apes have been captured from the wild as babies, their mothers killed and alienated from chimpanzee society to be brought up in the homes of humans. As they outgrow their novelty and become too strong to handle, they are shut away in small cages or tied on chains, isolated from social contact and suffering neglect. Tacugama works to stamp out the inhumane trade in chimpanzees, while being dedicated to the welfare of the victims already in captivity. Tacugama's Director, Bala Amarasekaran and staff are experienced and passionate about their tasks as adoptive parents to the 32 chimpanzee orphans now under their care.

More recently, all 32 chimpanzees have been integrated as a community to 3 connecting electric fenced enclosures, where they are being faced with the challenges of chimpanzee life and enjoy the comfort of friendships.

Tacugama takes in confiscated orphaned chimpanzees, nurtures them back to health, as many arrive malnourished or with evidence of physical abuse, and offer them the comfort and re-assurance they need to overcome their psychological traumas. Once they have gathered their strength, they start to learn the essential survival and social skills needed to live as a cohesive chimpanzee community in the forest, both with the help of the staff, but even more importantly they learn from the older chimps who become protective and devoted teachers.

Foundation Step By Step has an ongoing fund-raising and awareness campaign to support the valuable work of this sanctuary, which not only acts as a home for orphaned chimpanzees but equally as an education center for people to learn about the plight of chimpanzees and the importance of preserving them. Tacugama picks up the pieces in the cycle of environmental destruction and works together with the wildlife authorities to combat illegal hunting, the exotic pet trade and further destruction of precious forests.

Environmental Education and Community Participation

Foundation Step By Step considers environmental education and community participation to be the key components of the protection of any species and their habitats. We fund an Education Programme which supports a Step By Step Nature Club, workshops, field trips for schools and reaches out knowledge to youth groups, academic institutions, community groups and the general public in Sierra Leone. We have also recently acquired funding for a Community Development Programme which supports various micro-projects in towns surrounding the Western Area Forest Reserve (WAFR), as an alternative source of income to using the valuable natural products, mainly wood, otherwise illegally poached from the reserve.

Wild Habitat Protection

Without the adequate protection of habitats, the future for chimpanzees and all species will remain under threat. Foundation Step By Step is committed to supporting conservation programmes that offer solutions and repair kits to the present level of environmental degradation. We are in the planning stage of a new conservation programme in partnership with the Sierra Leone Government, national Universities and environmentalists, to ensure further protection for the WAFR, through ecological research, poacher patrols, education and community support. The WAFR is one of the most important natural habitats in the western area of Sierra Leone as it not only protects the main water source for Freetown, but is also inhabited by a diversity of species, some of whom like the wild chimpanzees are endangered.

For over 10 years, Sierra Leone has suffered from the brutality of a war that has left hundreds of thousands of people dead and many thousands more maimed. While it may be questioned why then the environment should be protected when people are in severe distress, we believe that humans are interlinked to their environments and the destruction of nature can only lead to further degradation for people, in the loss of clean water, deterioration of soils and erosion. We feel that our function is to work with national conservationists and communities to ensure that both people and nature co-exist and this beautiful country's environment will remain for future generations to respect and enjoy.

We Need Your Help

The future protection of Sierra Leone's fauna and flora rests on the tireless efforts and insight of those people determined to act on behalf of nature. Conservation programmes in Sierra Leone are in need of vehicles and equipment if they are to efficiently reach their goals. Tacugama's basic running costs are up to \$20,000 a year and to update equipment and maintain facilities would easily triple the costs. We need to raise up to \$50,000 to initiate the WAFR conservation programme and further education programmes. Foundation Step By Step cut overhead costs by working on a voluntary basis and we rely on our campaigns, grants and

donations from our members and the public to support these programmes in Sierra Leone.

Repairing the damage done and protecting nature from further abuse requires devoted time and money. Just as chimpanzees live and work as a community to protect their existence, so too must humans. Community action is fundamental to preserving not only our rights to exist, but all other beings with whom we share the earth. Humans have discovered that the balance of nature is so precarious that the slightest change of wind, from the flutter of a butterfly's wings can have the effect of creating a hurricane. There is no denial that humans have continued to upset the balance far beyond the flutter of wings. However, if we consider ourselves as a community, we have a responsibility to care about the future. Our colleagues in Sierra Leone take their responsibilities seriously and we humbly ask you to help them preserve a piece of this earth.

Your donations DO make a difference..

\$20 can buy food for all the Tacugama chimpanzees and pay for a school field trip to explore nature.

Flutter of your wings CAN be heard in Sierra Leone!

Foundation Step By Step Giro No.: 7631249

For more information abX-MoziX-Mozilla-Status: 0009ee adoption scheme or overseas donations please contact us at:

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